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# Review of Thomas F. Carney, *Content Analysis: A Technique for Systematic Inference from Communications*

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Review of Thomas F. Carney, *Content Analysis: A Technique for Systematic Inference from Communications*

**Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

CARNEY, THOMAS F. *Content Analysis: A Technique for Systematic Inference from Communications*. Winnipeg, Canada, University of Manitoba Press, 1972, 343 pp., no price given

This book argues in favor of content analysis as a set of techniques for the study of literature. The author, a historian himself, addresses students and scholars of the humanities and the arts because he feels that there exists a barrier against incorporating social science methods into the study of literature. His aim is a noble one.

Chapter 1, 2, 6, and 9 carry the burden of the task, with the last providing an overview. They repeatedly define content analysis; exemplify areas of application by means of available studies and hypothetical research problems; dismiss common criticism of the techniques and elaborate on some of the analytical concepts involved, such as units, categories, inference, standards, and research designs.

The whole book is well written and easy to read, though I wonder whether the author does not grossly underestimate the level of analytical sophistication of scholars in the humanities and the arts.

Particularly disturbing to someone with experience in content analysis is the naive optimism the author displays throughout. One can only wonder whether he does not thereby do a disservice to scholars of literature who are unfamiliar with the techniques; he so obviously oversells them that the predictable result can only be frustration.

For example, he argues: "Suppose there is a choice of any one of three textbooks as background for a course. There is a way of quickly and methodologically comparing what each has to offer. Do you know it? It could save expense and inconvenience, by enabling selection of the best one first time." And later: "People in the general arts area are still taking years of advanced work to pick up by trial and error a technique which can be taught to beginners in a matter of weeks." Similarly: "If you can employ content analysis easily, you will produce better essays and projects, synopses your reading more effectively and speedily, and make a more competent job of reviewing books."

These and many similarly optimistic claims are likely to induce false hopes and, as a consequence, may lead either to a state of discouragement or to bad research.

For example, presumably to reduce the threat of the unfamiliar, the author assures the reader: "Content analysis is a technique which aims to improve the quality of the inferences we make. . . . A mature scholar who has been working on literary documents in a disciplined way will recognize in the technique and extension, generalization, and formalization of what he has been doing." Certainly, any scientific technique for analysis should contribute to knowledge of the world and a content analyst could conceivably simulate the way a "mature scholar" comprehends and makes inferences from written

documents. But the latter case is most unlikely. A traditional content analyst typically first cuts a volume of text into units, whether they be words, themes, or whole books. He then codes each unit separately into descriptive terms—a set of categories for example. This results in an aggregate account of a body of literature, which may be couched in terms of frequencies, distributional characteristics, or qualitative differences. It is on these aggregate accounts that either statistical hypotheses are tested or inferences to extra documentary variables are based.

The literary scholar, on the other hand, may not be able to work through as many documents and assign equal weight to each unit as a content analyst is destined to do; but surely, this cannot be the only difference between a literary scholar and a content analyst. For an educated reader, documents may not at all consist of a collection of separate units. It may well be perceived as related patterns of concepts and ideas. The way in which a literary scholar comprehends the contents of a large body of literature may therefore not conform at all to the process of classification and/or counting by which most content analyses proceed.

Interpretation of literature may well involve processes by which cognitive patterns are matched and assembled into larger entities, and by which inconsistencies are removed and missing links inferred. Because intuitive interpretations of written documents are obtained in ways so different from those prescribed in content analysis literature, the results of either method of making inferences from verbal data are often incomparable—not necessarily inconsistent with each other but pertaining to entirely different ways of looking at the same phenomena. It is simply misleading to suggest that content analysts do better what literary scholars have done badly.

Several chapters of this book are concerned with related theory. Chapter 3 discusses a bit of everything concerning language, thought, communication, public opinion, gate keeping, cognitive dissonance, and the like; it is meant to introduce the reader to a general semanticist's view of word meaning. Here, the author concerns himself with some of the conceptual framework, that content analysts may engage when asking what words say about their writer.

In the choice of topics the author reveals his somewhat socio-psychological orientation. Even public opinion becomes the opinion expressed by a source. In chapter 4, this orientation naturally leads him to consider selective perception and the "new look" in psychology as especially relevant to the content analysts' interest. To show how this kind of content analysis can be both useful to and influenced by these areas of inquiry is, of course, a worthwhile and rare undertaking. But because the author is not willing to assume that the reader has any background in these subjects and because he gives himself only about two pages to review an area, the discussion is bound not to go beyond the most elementary notions.

Chapter 8 adds to the above both in quantity and in kind a discussion of several possible results of content analyses in literature: psychobiographies, cognitive maps, conceptual dictionaries, genealogies, profiles, and so forth. It contains many good research ideas that scholars of literature with a socio-psychological orientation will appreciate; but again, they remain elementary and often operationally obscure.

Notably absent are operationally clear and detailed expositions of the techniques of content analysis, even though both the title of the book and its introduction suggest their development. For example, there are many places where the concepts "reliability" and "validity" are discussed, but nowhere is the reader lead to a way of assessing either notion. Not even an understanding of their methodological role in a research design is provided. Therefore, a conscientious student will not know what to do when incongruencies are encountered.

In chapter 8, the reader is allegedly introduced to techniques of "pattern matching," which the author rightly claims to be common intellectual tools. But patterns in data are not exactly easy to manipulate by explicit techniques and computer programs that extract, compare, and recognize that such patterns are usually highly specialized.

The author's references to "easy to see" and "obvious," when talking about analyzing patterns, patterns on several levels, and patterns embedded in a master pattern, etc., appeal to intuition but do not explicate the techniques to the point where they could be incorporated into a research design. The conscientious student is again at a loss.

Perhaps notably different is chapter 7, which gives some practical ideas for coping with cross-tabulations of frequencies. This is worth reading for someone who has no experiences with categorical data. Chapter 5, devoted to sampling, illustrates some of the steps in deciding what to content analyze and does include references to literature in which the conscientious student will find procedures spelled out together with the methodological justifications for using them. In many other places, the author stops short of explicating the techniques by stating authoritatively that they are available.

In conclusion, the book no doubt does present some good ideas about doing research in the humanities and the arts. But the author's tendency to simplify what is involved induces rarely warranted hopes for easily achievable results. The omission of technical details makes the book easy reading but also less valuable for serious students.

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